

Jon Hoover, review of *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology* by Frank Griffel, *Theological Review* (Near East School of Theology) 31.1 (2010): 113-120.

Book Review Section

Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. xiv + 408 pp.

The great Muslim theologian al-Ghazali (d. 1111)—known to the Latin west as Algazel—has long proved enigmatic for his readers, and his writings are not entirely consistent. Some have given up on al-Ghazali as hopelessly contradictory. Others have tried to explain the variation with al-Ghazali's conversion to Sufism reported in his well-known autobiography *The Deliverance from Error (Al-Munqidh min al-dalal)*. Yet others have argued that al-Ghazali held an esoteric doctrine that he did not fully reveal. In the book under review, one of the most extensive and insightful studies of al-Ghazali ever undertaken, Frank Griffel seeks to set aside such theories and show that al-Ghazali does make sense and that he maintains a consistent theological perspective on cosmology throughout his scholarly life.

Griffel's first chapter reviews al-Ghazali's life in the light of previously underutilized sources and challenges central aspects of the received narrative. For example, traditional accounts turn al-Ghazali into a wandering, secluded Sufi after suddenly leaving his prominent teaching post at the Nizamiyya *madrasa* in Baghdad in 1095. Griffel argues that al-Ghazali did not in fact stop teaching after leaving the Nizamiyya. Rather, he sought to avoid the patronage of rulers and succeeded in doing so until pressured to teach at another Nizamiyya *madrasa* in Nishapur in 1106. The net effect of Griffel's work on al-Ghazali's life is to undermine appeal to the scholar's alleged life circumstances to explain inconsistencies in his thought. Griffel wants instead to understand al-Ghazali's writings as a coherent whole.

Chapters Two, Three and Four constitute something of a parenthesis before Griffel gets down to work on his new interpretation of al-Ghazali's cosmology in the rest of the book. The second chapter surveys several of al-Ghazali's followers and students, among them al-Ghazali's brother Ahmad, Abu Bakr b. al-'Arabi,

Ibn Tumart, and 'Ayn al-Qudat al-Hamadani. This shows that al-Ghazali's influence on medieval Islamic jurisprudence and theology was immediate and pervasive. It also supports the contention in Griffel's Introduction that al-Ghazali played a decisive role in naturalizing the philosophy of Ibn Sina (Avicenna) into Islamic theology.

Griffel lends additional support to this contention in Chapter Three by looking at al-Ghazali's *The Incoherence of the Philosophers (Tahafut al-falasifa)*, his renowned critique of the Aristotelian-Neoplatonist philosophy or *falsafa* of al-Farabi and Ibn Sina. Griffel argues that most of this book is dedicated to making room for the claims of revelation by revealing defects in the demonstrative proofs used by these philosophers to support their otherwise acceptable views. It is not that beliefs such as God's incorporeity are wrong; al-Ghazali believes the same. It is that they cannot be proven with the certainty that the philosophers attribute to rational demonstration (*burhan*). Knowledge of these beliefs comes instead through revelation. Griffel's analysis here opens the door to a fresh reading of al-Ghazali's *Incoherence* less taken with the rejectionist side of his critique and more attentive to those aspects of *falsafa* that al-Ghazali integrated into his own thought.

Al-Ghazali's *Incoherence* is of course much better known for condemning three doctrines of the philosophers (*falasifa*) deemed to be unbelief worthy of death: the eternity of the world, denial of God's knowledge of particulars in the world, and denial of bodily resurrection. Drawing on his earlier work in German,¹ Griffel argues that al-Ghazali was here following a recent trend to equate unbelief and apostasy. Well before al-Ghazali's time, Griffel explains, a charge of unbelief (*kufri*) meant no more than threatening someone with hell in the hereafter. It did not entail the death penalty for apostasy. That required the apostate to renounce Islam openly and adhere to another religion. As the *falasifa* considered themselves Muslims, they were not in danger. Al-Ghazali, however, equated unbelief with apostasy and thereby established a new category in which a professing Muslim advocating certain proscribed heterodox beliefs was to be executed.

Griffel observes that al-Ghazali was aware of the dangers his views entailed and that he thus wrote *The Decisive Criterion (Faysal al-tafriqa)* to clarify what

1 Frank Griffel, *Apostasie und Toleranz im Islam: die Entwicklung zu al-Ghazālī's Urteil gegen die Philosophie und die Reaktion der Philosophen* (Leiden: Brill, 2000). For an English summary of this work, Griffel directs his readers to the review of Michael Schwarz in *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 27 (2002): 591-601.

does not constitute heterodox belief worthy of death. Here al-Ghazali simplifies Islam to believing in the unity of God and accepting what the Prophet Muhammad brought, including reports about the hereafter, and he elaborates a rule for determining acceptable ways to understand revelation. This rule leaves considerable room for theological diversity short of the proscribed beliefs of the Isma'ilis and the *falasifa*. Griffel devotes Chapter Four to elaborating how the rule works, and here again Griffel notes how al-Ghazali's comparatively tolerant spirit allowed a considerable number of Aristotelian views to find a home within the fold of Islam.

Before examining the rest of Griffel's book, which treats Ghazali's cosmology, it will prove helpful to sketch some background. One of the most difficult puzzles in scholarship on al-Ghazali's theology has been God's creative action, and in the recent literature Richard Frank and Michael Marmura—both of whom just passed away in 2009—exemplify the problem with their diametrically opposed interpretations. At issue is the character of God's freedom and power in creation and the degree to which al-Ghazali adopts the necessitarian cosmology of Ibn Sina.

According to Michael Marmura, al-Ghazali is an Ash'ari occasionalist. God creates everything in this world directly without any mediation of secondary causes. God creates both the human power to act and the human act, but there is no efficient causal connection between the power and the act. At most, the presence of the human power constitutes a condition for God's creation of the act in a human being. If, in Marmura's view, al-Ghazali sometimes uses Avicennan vocabulary and speaks of natural causality, he employs it in an occasionalist sense.²

At the opposite end of the interpretive spectrum are two books by Richard Frank published in 1992 and 1994. Frank argues that al-Ghazali abandons Ash'ari occasionalism entirely and adopts a necessitarian cosmology of natural causality along the lines of Ibn Sina. Al-Ghazali's God—like the God of Ibn Sina—is entirely subject to the necessity of His nature and was never able to create other than what He in fact has created. If al-Ghazali still sounds like an Ash'ari at times, it is because he has adopted Ash'ari language for ordinary

2 For recent statement of Marmura's view, see Michael E. Marmura, "Al-Ghazālī," in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, eds. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 137-154.

people while adhering to Avicennan ideas in his private belief.³

Griffel presents a new thesis that aims to dissolve the impasse between Frank and Marmura. Al-Ghazali's God is not subject to the necessity of His nature as Frank would have it. Nor is he a strict Ash'ari occasionalist as Marmura thinks. Rather, Griffel argues, al-Ghazali consistently maintains throughout his life that God creates events in the world *either* through God's direct acts *or* through secondary and intermediary causes. He never decides between the two alternatives. In fact, explains Griffel, al-Ghazali sees the issue as irresolvable from the perspectives of both revelation and rational proof, and he thus loses interest in further cosmological explanation (see especially p. 122). While al-Ghazali does speak frequently as if the world works according to secondary causality because that is how it appears to us, he sees no way to decide how God's creation works in itself.

Griffel supports this thesis by working carefully through the relevant Ghazalian texts in Chapters Six through Nine. After providing a useful overview of cosmological theories in the preceding Islamic tradition in Chapter Five, Griffel returns to al-Ghazali's *Incoherence* in Chapter Six. The famous opening line of the seventeenth discussion of the *Incoherence* has often been read to support strict occasionalism: "The connection between what is habitually believed to be a cause and what is habitually believed to be an effect is not necessary according to us" (quoted on p. 149, transliterated terms omitted). Griffel explains that in the wider context of the *Incoherence* this statement cannot be read to deny secondary causality entirely. Instead, al-Ghazali simply affirms here that the links that God may have established between causes and effects could have been established in some other way. If in fact God creates through chains of secondary causes that now lead to their effects with the force of natural necessity, God could have in the beginning set up the world—the causal connections—in some other fashion if He had so willed. With this, Griffel observes, al-Ghazali rejects Avicennan necessitarianism while accepting the possibility of natural causality willed into existence by God.

In the subsequent chapters, Griffel works hard to sustain both al-Ghazali's noncommittal position on causality and freedom in the will of al-Ghazali's God. In Chapter Seven Griffel explains that God's eternal foreknowledge in al-

Ghazali's theology yields a fully predetermined world not unlike—for practical purposes—that of the *falasifa*. While, according to al-Ghazali, causal connections in the outside world are not necessary in themselves, they do appear necessary to us. God in His will could decide to change the causal relations. However, we can be assured that God will not do so because of His eternal unchanging foreknowledge. The question of God's eternal foreknowledge appears again in Griffel's ninth chapter, as well as God's generosity (*jud*). From one perspective God's generosity and God's knowledge govern and necessitate what God wills. We might even say that the knowledge and generosity of al-Ghazali's God leave God no choice in the matter of what He creates. However, Griffel underlines that the will of al-Ghazali's God, considered in itself, could will other than what it does. God's will in itself is free, even if it is ultimately necessitated by something else, namely, God's foreknowledge and generosity.

Al-Ghazali's *magnum opus*, *The Revival of the Religious Science (Ihya' 'ulum al-din)*, treated in Chapter Eight, confronts Griffel with more evidence for a necessitarian reading of the great scholar. Griffel begins Chapter Eight by noting that al-Ghazali is concerned in the *Revival* primarily with ethics and what is essential for salvation and thus never raises the issue of causal connections directly. Yet, al-Ghazali does use causal language in the *Revival* to speak about the generation of human acts, and this raises another theological question. Al-Ghazali understands the causes as conditions which God respects in creating acts. For example God's creation of an act in a human being is conditional upon that human possessing life and a will. The question then is whether it was God who set up these conditions or whether the conditions impose limitations and requirements on God that have always been beyond God's control. Griffel observes that al-Ghazali does not address this question either.

Griffel also examines another matter al-Ghazali fails to clarify: his affirmation in the *Revival* that this world is the best possible that God could have created. The import of this affirmation is basically that of Ibn Sina—some evil is necessary to the origination of the best possible world—but Griffel helpfully shows where al-Ghazali parts ways with the philosopher. Al-Ghazali justifies that this is the best possible world by citing evidence of goodness in creation instead of deriving it from the nature of God's nature and attributes. That is, al-Ghazali is following the evidential precedent of the Sufi Abu Talib al-Makki rather than the necessitarian logic of Ibn Sina. Nevertheless, al-Ghazali affirms with Ibn Sina—apparently at least—that it would have been impossible for God to have

3 Richard M. Frank, *Creation and the Cosmic System: Al-Ghazālī & Avicenna* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1992); idem, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ash'arite School* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 1994).

created a different world. Such claims led Richard Frank to conclude that al-Ghazali's cosmology was fully necessitarian, but Griffel for his part prefers to read 'impossible' here in a weaker sense linked to the level of God's will: a world other than this one is possible in itself but impossible in view of what God has in fact willed to create.

Chapter Nine discusses three key works that al-Ghazali wrote after the *Revival: The Highest Goal (al-Maqṣad al-asna)*, *The Niche of Lights (Mishkat al-anwar)* and his last work *Restraining the Ordinary People (Iḥām al-'awamm)*. At the beginning of the chapter, Griffel again reminds his readers that al-Ghazali appears to have been noncommittal throughout his life on the question of occasionalism versus secondary causality. However, al-Ghazali's comparison of the universe to a water clock in the *Highest Goal* would seem to favor some kind of secondary causality. In this simile, God creates the world and sustains it much as the clock maker designs the water clock, builds it, and then gives it a constant source of energy to keep it running. Griffel does not to my mind adequately address how this simile could be squared with an occasionalist universe in order to show that al-Ghazali remained uncommitted on the character of causality. Griffel is however more explicit about the similar challenge to his interpretation posed by the *Niche of Lights*.

As Griffel explains, the last section of the Sufistic *Niche of Lights* guides al-Ghazali's readers through several levels of insight up to the point of those who believe that "the one who is obeyed" (*al-muta'*) is the Lord of the universe. Al-Ghazali rejects this level as inadequate and moves onto the highest level, which is that of those who recognize another beyond "the one who is obeyed." While "the one who is obeyed" moves the heavens, beyond it is the one who created both it and the heavens. The identity of "the one who is obeyed" has long puzzled scholars and given rise to a variety of interpretations. Unfortunately, Griffel does not survey these earlier proposals, but he does offer an original and very plausible solution to the problem: "the one who is obeyed" is in fact the God found at the top of the hierarchy in the Avicennan cosmology. Griffel suggests that al-Ghazali here adopts the whole cosmic system of the *falasifa* and then sets above it the true God who freely created it all. In the Avicennan cosmos, the First, or God, emanates the first Intellect, which then produces nine celestial spheres down to the sphere of the moon and from there all that takes place in the sublunar sphere. Everything is linked through chains of secondary causes back up to the First. For al-Ghazali the First of Ibn Sina is "the one who is obeyed" and the one who

produces the world by necessity of its nature. Above "the one who is obeyed" stands the personal God who decided to design, create and sustain this necessitarian cosmos of the *falasifa* much as the clock maker created and sustained the water clock in al-Ghazali's *Highest Goal*. With this, Griffel argues, al-Ghazali retains God's freedom in creating the world while characterizing the world after the fashion of the philosophers.

Although the *Niche of Lights* does not address the question of causal connections directly, Griffel acknowledges that this book could readily be interpreted as a shift away from al-Ghazali's noncommittal stance on how God creates and a move firmly toward the natural causality of Ibn Sina. Griffel argues however that such a thought is "shattered" by al-Ghazali's last work *Restraining the Ordinary People* (p. 266). On Griffel's reading of this treatise, al-Ghazali observes that the relationship between God and His throne—assuming that the throne mediates God's creation of the world in a fashion akin to "the one who is obeyed" in the *Niche of Lights*—is *either* necessary in itself (the view of the *falasifa*) or a matter of God's free choice and habit. Consistent with his views elsewhere, al-Ghazali adopts the latter option. However, the 'throne' may not mediate creation of the world at all. It may have an entirely different function, in which case God may create the world directly without mediating causes. In al-Ghazali's view the function of the throne cannot be known for sure, and with this, Griffel maintains, al-Ghazali reaffirms his noncommittal stance on the character of causal connections in the world.

In his Conclusion Griffel rehearses the main features of al-Ghazali's cosmology, and he chides those who would too easily chalk up the variety in al-Ghazali's corpus to esotericism or outright inconsistency. Griffel argues that principled agnosticism on *how* God creates events in the world fits with a more general Ghazalian reticence to discuss matters that are irresolvable and of no religious and ethical consequence: "This reticence is not esotericism but rather the didactic result of al-Ghazali's view that certain types of knowledge can be harmful to some people" (p. 286). In the final analysis Griffel's al-Ghazali is a pragmatic religious teacher seeking to guide his readers safely past the thickets of unprofitable speculation so as to provide the practical knowledge needed for salvation, each according to his level of understanding.

The strength of Griffel's book is that he perseveres in arguing a new and compelling thesis through a close reading of notoriously intractable Ghazalian texts. However, there are passages that do not fit as well as they might—

especially in the *Niche of Lights* and the *Highest Goal*—and I am not sure Griffel has taken al-Ghazali's Sufism seriously enough. In at least the *Niche of Lights* and the *Revival*, al-Ghazali himself indicates that there are different levels of understanding and experience. The ultimate goal for al-Ghazali is the Sufi state of annihilation (*fana'*) of the self in God, which entails seeing the monistic truth that there is in fact nothing but God. There is no real existent but the One. Griffel acknowledges monism in al-Ghazali (pp. 254-55), and he tries to argue—too briefly—that al-Ghazali's monism includes within its compass the monotheism of a personal God who freely creates a real universe. But monism and monotheism as defined here are not the same, and I sense that Griffel has not plumbed the depths of al-Ghazali's cosmology fully.

This leads me to interrogate Griffel's polemic against earlier scholars who explain difficulties in al-Ghazali's texts with esotericism. Griffel is certainly right that we as scholars must persist in trying to make sense of long standing conundrums in our fields of inquiry, and Griffel's work has without doubt yielded a very rich harvest that complicates the far too facile conclusions of earlier generations. Nonetheless, al-Ghazali does—as Griffel himself indicates—modulate his message for different audiences, and he does posit different levels of understanding and experience for different types of people. If al-Ghazali is monist when speaking about the ultimate annihilation in God experienced among the elite but monotheist otherwise, this is surely a kind of esotericism. Attributing esotericism—something not uncommon among Sufis—to al-Ghazali need not mean that we have given up the search to understand him better. The challenge now is to characterize that esotericism more accurately.

My reservations aside, Griffel has achieved a major feat of scholarship, and the wealth of knowledge in medieval Islamic theology and philosophy that he brings to bear in explicating al-Ghazali's texts is truly remarkable. The book also offers a great deal more for the student of al-Ghazali than I have been able to convey here, not least of which are Griffel's carefully considered approach to printed editions of al-Ghazali's texts and his reflections on criteria for discerning authentic Ghazalian works. Griffel's book is a veritable *tour de force* that will remain a benchmark in Ghazalian studies for a long time to come.

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